

Boxing Myself In

By Lt. Peter Fey

Our squadron returned from a detachment to NAF El Centro with maintenance and safety concerns. We cancelled follow-on tasking in support of a weapons school and started fixing our problems.

The decreased flight time meant the aircrew had started to fall out of NATOPS qualifications. To compound our situation, our Prowler squadron of four jets was way down on the parts-support priority. I was regular Navy in a reserve squadron, and while I was better off than most of the reservists who hadn't been flying nearly as much, I still hadn't flown in over three weeks.

To top it all off, our one remaining "up" jet had had a bird strike while on a low-level and had diverted to Roanoke, Va. A maintenance team drove to Roanoke and fixed the damaged radome and pitot-static system. Ops then arranged a hop for the aircrew on the base's C-12, which was on a routine flight to Roanoke. I wasn't scheduled to be part of the retrieval crew because I was taking a week's leave and was busy tying up loose ends.

However, plans change, and, as the only person available, I was thrown into the fray. An EP exam was required to get me current because I hadn't flown for so long, but the thought of taking the exam never occurred

to me. I was busy hustling to catch up with the others, who already had put their gear in bags and were headed to base ops.

The C-12 flight to Roanoke was uneventful. Upon arrival, however, we found out the jet still wasn't fixed. We waited another two hours as the maintainers finished the repairs, fueled the jet, and did a daily.

The C-12 pilot had filed a flight plan and had checked weather before leaving Andrews. The weather shop claimed the weather would be good until late afternoon; then, the typical summer thunderstorms would develop. We updated our takeoff time and weather, then milled about in the general-aviation terminal. The forecasters still called for thunderstorms to develop as the afternoon got hotter.

Because the runway at Roanoke is only 6,800 feet, we opted just to fill the main fuel tanks and make a flaps-30 takeoff. After a FOD walkdown, we preflighted

the jet and made sure our exhausts weren't pointed at the small planes that surrounded ours. Engine starts and all ground operations were standard, with one exception. While we taxied, the pilot commented that one of the brakes was grabbing and was causing the plane to swerve. No worry—if we needed to, we'd take a trap and fix it when we got home.

Once airborne, we were put on the long-arrival train to get through Washington, D.C.'s busy airspace. As we approached the first part of the STAR, we checked ATIS, which reported weather below minimums. We quickly asked for holding to sort out our problems. As the backseater called METRO, asking for weather conditions at NAS Patuxent River, the pilot and I tried to figure out how long we could hold with our already low-fuel state. The storms clobbering Andrews AFB slowly headed for Pax, and, if we didn't hurry, our divert wouldn't be an option.

It turned out ATIS was wrong, and METRO reported weather at minimums—enough for us to try the

much to the dismay of the controller, who brought us in. We broke out the lights of the field just as he called the MDA. The controller did a great job.

Andrews AFB has dual runways. The Air Force side is used extensively by heavy guys and has no arresting gear. We requested the Air Force side because it has lower minimums to get us below the weather. After we broke out, we got a good look at the wet runway; the grabby brakes immediately came to mind. So much for making an arrested landing if needed. The pilot aerobraked as long as possible, and we used the entire 9,300 feet of runway to slow. We taxied to our line, with the brakes squeaking and grabbing the entire way, then shut down—a little wiser and with some serious lessons learned.

I kept thinking of a NATOPS-simulator flight when I was in the RAG, where a particularly vehement instructor kept warning us not to back ourselves into a box. He warned that at some point in our career, we probably would do just that, and, hopefully, we'd have enough skill, luck, or both, to pull through. Today was that time.

Although nothing went too terribly wrong, all the events in this chain were in place for us to screw up royally. I don't think we considered all the potential risks, nor the appropriate ways to minimize them. I was rusty in the jet, and reviewing EPs would have helped me get my head in the game.

We knew there would be bad weather at the field as the afternoon progressed. We also knew maintenance delays probably would force us into bad weather. On top of that, we had minimum fuel for the shortened runway, which put us further into the box. I don't think it ever crossed our mind we might have problems with the TACAN or ILS—which might have changed our cavalier attitude about heading into known thunderstorms.

Accepting the maintenance delay and waiting for the weather to pass would have alleviated most of our

approach. After one turn in holding, we continued on the arrival. Did I mention that we didn't have a radar because it had been damaged in the bird strike? The maintenance guys had just pinned the pedestal so we could get home. It would've been nice to have, since we were getting beat up by some ugly cumulonimbus clouds. We tried in vain to receive the Andrews TACAN but got an intermittent no-go light. The TACAN eventually failed.

As I checked in with Andrews Radar, we figured our fuel state would give us one pass before we had to head for our divert. I thought “trick or treat on the ball” was just a ship term. I called for vectors to the ILS for a full stop, which we received. The bird must have damaged the ILS antenna because we had nothing—no glideslope, no azimuth, and no outer, middle or inner markers. We quickly called for an ASR,

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problems. Instead, we made a bad position even worse by pushing forward with our can-do attitude—all this attitude on a simple 0.7 IFR flight. I rather would have spent the night in Roanoke and left later, than press such a precarious position. 🛩️

Lt. Fey flies with VAQ-209.

